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Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries announces new regulations for 2002

At the April 4, 2002 monthly business meeting of the state's Marine Fisheries Commission, many new regulations were enacted affecting commercial and recreational fishing for 2002. These actions affect fishing for summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass. No changes were enacted for the state's lobster fisheries. These issues were discussed at March 25-26 public hearings and will be in effect on April 26, 2002.

1) Changes to summer flounder (fluke) commercial and recreational seasons:

- For commercial fishermen the "directed fishery" will open on June 10, instead of July 8. The trip limits (300 lbs. for netters and 200 lbs. for hook-and-line fishermen) and the no-fishing days (Friday and Saturday) will remain the same as previous years.
- For recreational fishermen, the closed seasons (Jan. 1 - May 24 and Sept. 6 - Dec. 31) have been eliminated.

2) Changes to scup commercial trip limits and seasons:

- For trawlers fishing during the squid season (April 23 through May 31) scup trip limit was increased from 100 to 300 lbs. This increased limit is designed to accommodate the occasional by-catch of scup and prevent unnecessary discard mortality.
- For the weir fishery, the overall set-aside of the state's summer/fall quota was increased from 75,000 to 120,000 lbs.
- For the summer-time directed fishery, the opening date will be July 1 instead of July 17 and the daily possession limit was increased from 200 to 250 lbs.

3) Changes to scup recreational bag limits for anglers aboard party or charter vessels:

- The daily possession limit for recreational anglers aboard for-hire vessels will be 100-fish for the entire recreational season, which ends October 6. Previous regulations allowed 100 scup for anglers aboard for-hire vessels during May and June and then dropped to 50 scup during July through October 6.
- Limits for shore anglers and for those on private vessels remain unchanged: 50 fish per angler with a maximum of 100 fish per vessel regardless of the number of anglers aboard.

4) Black Sea Bass trip limits and pot vent size amended to comply with the management plan:

A) The following possession limits will be in effect per quarter with adjustments when 60% of the quarterly quota is projected to be taken:

- For Quarter II (April through June) the daily possession limit will be 1,500 pounds/day and it will be adjusted to 150 pounds/day for all gears or 1,000 pounds/week for the directed sea bass pot fishery.
- For Quarter III (July through September) the daily possession limit will be 500 pounds/day and then adjust to 100 pounds/day for all gears or 700 pounds/week for the directed sea bass pot fishery.
- For Quarter IV (October through December) the daily possession limit will be 750 pounds/day and then adjust to 100 pounds/day for all gears or 700 pounds/week for the directed sea bass pot fishery.

B) Fish pot vent size was increased to 1 3/8 by 5 3/4 inches for rectangular vents, or a circular vent of 2 3/8 inches in diameter; or a square vent with sides of 2 inches inside measure.

5) No changes were enacted for this year's commercial lobster fisheries.

At the recommendation of DMF, the Commission agreed to maintain existing regulations for 2002, and not enact - at this time - the area-specific rules crafted by industry-based Lobster Conservation Management Teams. These teams met independently for four years to craft plans that meet the egg-production goal targets for each area as mandated by the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission. Director Diodati credited the participating fishermen for working diligently to craft each area-specific management plan. However he was concerned that the rules would result in an unprecedented level of regulatory complexity, and concluded that "It would be impractical to expect state agencies to proficiently administer, enforce, and monitor such a variety of regulations for a single state fishery, especially at a time when agency resources are at a low." The proposals, if enacted would have created inconsistent rules across the state affecting minimum sizes, "v-notched lobster" definitions, and effort control programs.

Diodati pledged to work over the next 7 months with the Lobster Conservation Management Teams and other industry members to craft more uniform rules for the Commonwealth. The Division will conduct industry meetings to determine if more uniform rules, such as a statewide program to control fishing effort, could be crafted to reach each area's conservation goals. Diodati hoped the user groups would work cooperatively across the state's lobstering areas to craft consistent rules that meet the various area-specific conservation goals. Diodati noted that "whenever fishermen feel they are part of the regulatory process, compliance with the rules will be enhanced."

DMF is especially interested in crafting a state-wide plan to reduce lobster fishing effort (traps) to improve conservation. DMF intends to craft an effort reduction plan that uses the amount of traps fished by fishermen in the year 2000 - and those years prior to 2000 - as a basis for determining a fisherman's future participation level in the fishery.